

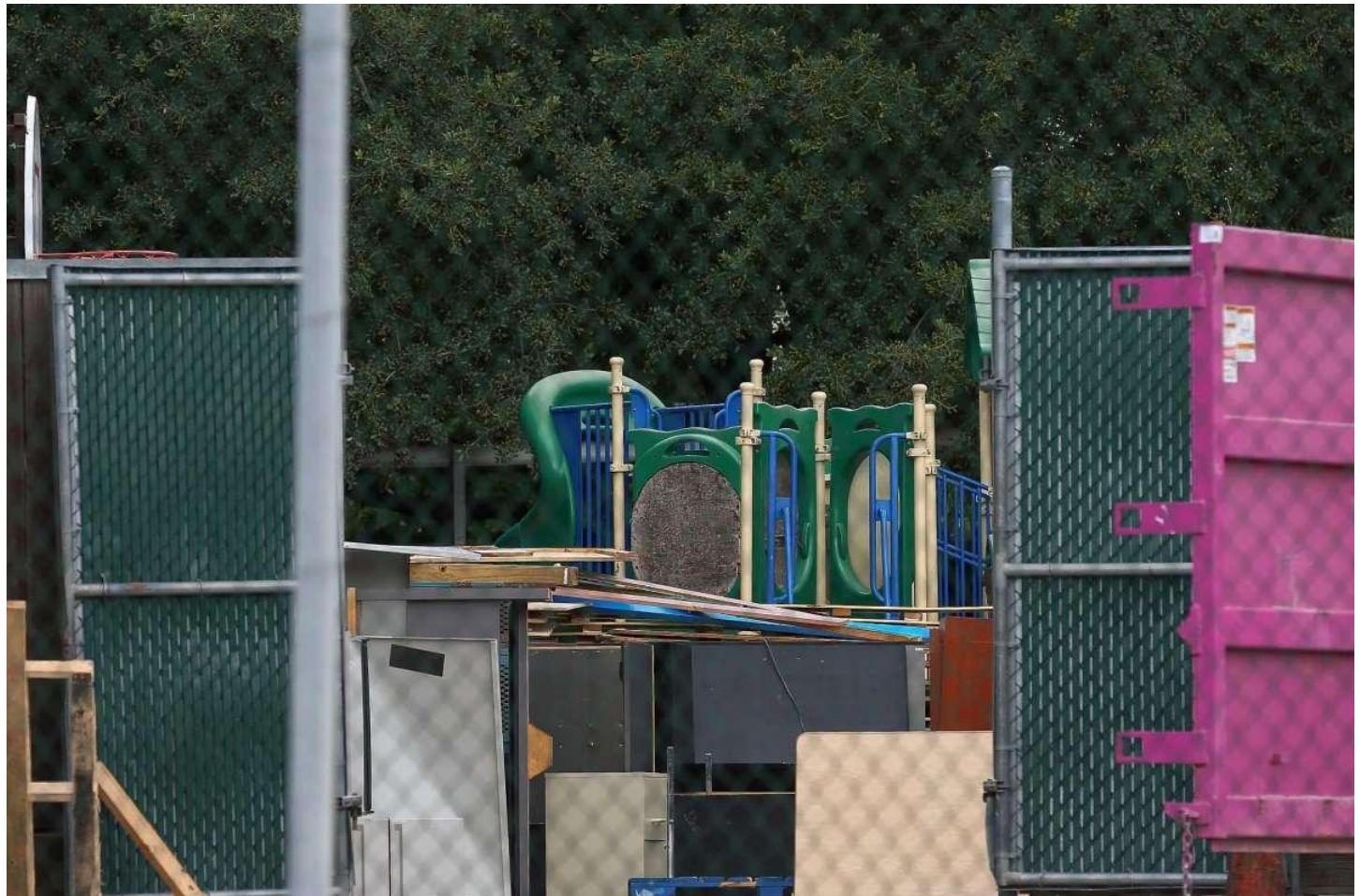
Exhibit E

LOCAL // HOUSTON

Immigrant children's shelter considered for downtown Houston

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Southwest Key Programs, a non-profit group that houses unaccompanied immigrant children, confirmed Friday that it has signed a lease with a former Star of Hope facility, pictured, at 419 Emancipation Avenue Friday, June 15, 2018, in Houston. Stakeholders were told the facility would house up to 230 children under the age of 12, and pregnant ...

Photo: Godofredo A. Vasquez, Houston Chronicle

The large vacant warehouse in downtown Houston has housed women and families who were once homeless and adults displaced by Hurricane Harvey.

Until now, however, it has never sheltered small children who are on their own in a strange country, many of them separated from their parents who were jailed after illegally crossing the southern border.

Southwest Key Programs, a Texas nonprofit that has a lucrative contract with the federal government to care for thousands of unaccompanied immigrant children, confirmed Friday it has signed a lease with the owner of the warehouse at 419 Emancipation Ave.

NO DIVIDAS: Vigil becomes protest as outrage grows over separation of families at U.S. border

Its application with the state requests a general residential operating license to hold up to 240 children between the ages of “0 to 17.” Several stakeholders who work with immigrant minors said they have been told the facility would largely serve “tender age” children who are younger than 12, as well as pregnant and nursing teenagers.

The federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, which is in charge of unaccompanied immigrant children, did not return calls or several emails seeking details. A spokesperson for Southwest Key would not provide more information. But advocates who care for such children said the government informed them this week that the facility would focus on this population.

It would be the first residential center in the nation detaining such small children without their relatives or other foster parents, and advocates say it is a direct consequence of the government’s new “zero tolerance” policy to criminally prosecute parents who cross the border illegally. By law, their children cannot be held in prison with them and are transferred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, a subset of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Until the crackdown, most children in the agency’s care — so-called unaccompanied minors — came here alone to find relatives and are usually between the ages of 10 and 17. Most were quickly released to family or other sponsors already in the country.

Protesters gather for a Families Belong Together prayer vigil outside a facility near downtown Houston that has been leased to house unaccompanied immigrant children Sunday, June 17, 2018.

Photo: Michael Ciaglo, Houston Chronicle

As young as 18 months

But under the administration’s new strategy, children as young as 18 months who arrive with their parents have been forced into government custody while the adults serve brief sentences for the misdemeanor crime before going to immigrant detention centers, and in some cases being deported without their children.

Departments of Justice and Homeland Security officials on Friday reiterated their position that they are simply fully enforcing a law that has been on the books for decades and that parents cannot be exempt from prosecution simply because they are traveling with children. They have argued the strategy is necessary to solve a “crisis” at the southern border and to deter others who may be contemplating coming to the United States..

Though overall illegal crossings are at their lowest in decades, the number of families and children, many asylum-seekers from Central America, rose another 14 percent in May to almost 16,000, reaching levels last seen during President Barack Obama’s administration.

CRACKDOWN: Trump moves to end 'catch and release', prosecuting parents and removing children who cross border

Officials say families are reunified after parents serve their sentence and are transferred to immigration custody, though advocates for children contend that often doesn’t happen. In one case a Guatemalan father was deported without his 18-month-old son and had no idea where the toddler was. They were reunited in December, five months after being separated.

Federal officials said Friday about 2,000 children have been separated from their parents between mid-April, when Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the new zero-tolerance policy, and the end of May.

The sudden surge has overwhelmed the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which now has more than 11,400 children in their care in about 100 shelters across the country that are almost full. The ORR has issued calls to agencies that run such facilities for the government to see if they can increase their capacity and are considering housing children in tent-like structures on military bases, including in Texas.

“They are being required to house increasingly large numbers of very young children ... who should have never gone to (the agency) in the first place,” said Jennifer Podkul, director of policy for Kids in Need of Defense, a Washington, D.C., advocacy group that provides services to unaccompanied minors.

Keeping such young children in a residential facility like the one proposed in Houston would represent a sharp shift from previous practice.

“My understanding is that the kids would be sleeping at this facility in Houston, and that’s surprising and would be a different structure than we’ve ever seen before for this type of population,” she said. “This would be the first one.”

Aura Fernandez, left, holds her crying son, Leonardo Fernandez, 1, as protesters gather for a Families Belong Together prayer vigil outside a facility near downtown Houston that has been leased to house unaccompanied immigrant children Sunday, June 17, 2018.
Photo: Michael Ciaglo, Houston Chronicle

Facility a ‘substantial departure’

Small children and pregnant teenagers are usually placed with foster parents who work with specialized organizations that contract with the federal government to provide such care. The minors spend their nights in a foster home and their days in a licensed facility for children, where they are provided services such as medical and legal screenings.

“Traditionally the government has relied on families and supported homestays for this population because of their special needs,” Podkul said. “Very young children can’t sleep through the night all the time. They have physical limitations because of their size. ... I don’t know how you provide for that in such a large facility.”

Kay Bellor, a vice president at the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said her agency provides temporary and long-term foster care for about 200 immigrant children, focusing particularly on those of “tender age.”

Housing such children in a residential facility would be a “substantial departure.”

“It’s completely antithetical to their well-being,” she said. “You want to put a young child in a home, not in a group setting, not in a shelter, because of their particular vulnerabilities. Before, because you didn’t have so many, the system generally could absorb them. But now you have so many more thanks to the separation policy and everyone is scrambling.”

QUESTIONABLE POLICY: Her husband murdered, her son taken away, a mother seeking asylum tells a judge, 'I have lost everything'

For years, the Emancipation Avenue facility housed families who had recently become homeless and sought refuge at Star of Hope, a local nonprofit. The organization sold it in 2016 and moved its shelter to a new, bigger location on Reed Road near Texas 288 in southwest Houston.

After Harvey left thousands without homes, the city leased the 53,600-square-foot facility, partnering with another nonprofit, New Hope Housing, to run its operations.

Nicole Cassier Mason, New Hope's vice president for fund development and communications, said it provided medium-term housing for about 300 single adults between September 2017 and March 2018, when the collaboration ended.

"It was very much bunk house-style, dormitory-style," she said.

Inspections, permits

At the time, each unit had four bunk beds with an adjoining bathroom and the facility had a large kitchen. It had laundry areas, several rooms for people to meet privately with case managers, and relaxation areas with televisions. A large courtyard in the back contained a playground.

"There is very much space there that could accommodate a family-type situation," Cassier Mason said. "It is a wonderful shell space that with a few modifications could do a lot of good serving people who are low-income or people who are homeless."

City of Houston spokesman Alan Bernstein said the facility is privately-owned and up to date on its permits.

Protesters march during a Families Belong Together prayer vigil outside a facility near downtown Houston that has been leased to house unaccompanied immigrant children Sunday, June 17, 2018.

Photo: Michael Ciaglo, Houston Chronicle

"The city is not involved in whom the private facility can lease its property to," he said.

Alanna Reed, a spokeswoman for the Houston's Department of Public Works, said the facility underwent a full occupancy inspection and a certificate of occupancy was issued last week. It also received a change-of-ownership inspection in March. She said it has a food service establishment permit allowing it to provide meals on site.

"As far as the city is concerned, they have everything they need to operate," she said.

David Denenburg, with 419 Hope Partners, the listed owners of the property, declined to comment. Denenburg specializes in the restoration and re-purposing of buildings, with an emphasis on historical structures, according to his website. One purchase includes the 1938 Schlumberger building in the East End.

John Reynolds, a spokesman for the state Health and Human Services Commission that oversees licensing for child care facilities, said it is reviewing the licensing request from Southwest Key.

A spokesperson for Southwest Key, Jeff Eller, would only confirm the lease of the warehouse.

A NEW AMERICA: Private prisons boom in Texas and across America under Trump's immigration crackdown

"At this time, it's too early to comment on its future plans," he said. "As a matter of policy, we do not comment on possible changes in facilities."

The organization houses more than 5,100 immigrant children, nearly half of all those currently in government custody, and Eller said it is close to capacity.

The nonprofit recently came under the national spotlight when U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, a Democrat from Oregon, was barred from entering one of its biggest facilities, a shelter in Brownsville caring for almost 1,500 immigrant children between the ages of 10 and 17.

The Austin-based nonprofit is paid more than \$400 million to care for immigrant children in 27 shelters across Texas, Arizona and California.

Lomi Kriel writes stories about immigrants, the complicated process of immigration, and its consequences. If you're an immigrant, lawyer, critic of the current system or a supporter, an ICE or Border Patrol agent, someone who feels they unfairly lost their job to an immigrant, an asylum seeker or a deportee, send tips and ideas to lomi.kriel@chron.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@lomikriel.](https://twitter.com/lomikriel)

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